

# CHAPTER 1

My big brother's hobby was the end of the world.

I don't know why, but he was fascinated by it. He'd talk about it all the time, all the different ways that civilisation as we knew it could come crumbling down. I had to listen to his plans to escape from tsunamis, meteors, floods, aliens and his favourite, zombies. He would never shut up about zombies. The walls of his room were covered with maps, and he'd drawn all sorts of lines and arrows on them. He was ready for anything.

I never got it. I mean, he was a normal sixteen year old the rest of the time. He hung out with his friends, he got good marks at school. He even had a girlfriend, though I think she was as confused about his hobby as I was. I mean, he wasn't even that geeky. Why would he have such a weird obsession?

I asked him about it once. He just shrugged.

"I like to be prepared," he'd said.

"For what?" I asked. "Zombies? Aliens? That's never going to happen."

He'd laughed at that. I can still see him, standing above me, the light shining off his glasses and his blond hair. "I guess you're right."

"So why do you do it?"

He'd sat down to tie up the laces on his boot, bringing himself down to my level. "I guess I just like the way it makes me feel. Safe. Like I'm prepared for anything, you know?"

I thought about that for a moment. "That's kind of weird," I told him.

He'd laughed again. He was always laughing. He never took anything really seriously. "Yeah. But everyone's a bit weird." He'd stood up again, kicking his feet a few times to make sure that his shoes stayed on. "Come on, little brother. Time to go to the movies."

Then he'd ruffled my hair and we'd left.

That had been eight months ago. I hadn't seen him since.

I shook myself out of my memories and looked around. Sam and Mike were standing above me, on the stairs that led to the upper floor of the Central Library. They were slouched against the wall, trying to show how unbothered they were by everything, but I could see how tense they were. So I decided to lighten the atmosphere with a joke.

"Hey guys, have you heard this one before?"

They both turned and looked at me, not impressed. I wasn't surprised. No one around here had a sense of humour.

“So there was this library, a bit like this one, only with a librarian. And one day a chicken walked in.”

“Shut up, Jesse,” Sam said. He was the leader on this expedition because he was the oldest. He was also a lot taller than me, though just about everyone was. That didn’t mean I had to listen to what he had to say.

“So the chicken walks up to the counter and says to the librarian, ‘Book, book.’”

Sam tried to ignore me and said to Mike, “Why do you think they haven’t turned up yet?”

“Dunno,” said Mike. I’m not sure why Sam bothered asking. ‘Dunno’ was one of the only things that Mike ever said. Rumour was that it was his first word.

“So the librarian gave the chicken a book and it walked out the door. The next day it came back and the same thing happened. It walked up to the librarian and said, ‘Book, book.’ The librarian gave it another book and it walked out the door.”

Sam continued to talk over me. “I mean, we’ve got the food they were asking for. They should be here.”

I didn’t give up. “This kept happening day after day and eventually the librarian begins to wonder where all his books are going. So the next day, as usual, the chicken comes in, goes up to the counter and says, ‘Book, book.’ The librarian gives it a book and it turns around and walks out of the door. But this time the librarian follows the chicken.”

Sam gritted his teeth. “Seriously, Jesse. Shut up.”

“He follows the bird and it goes out of the library

and down the road. Then it goes down a farm track, still clutching the book under one wing. It reaches the farm and struts over to a pond. In the middle of the pond is a frog and scattered around it are all the books that the chicken has been taking out of the library. The chicken goes up to the frog and puts its present on a lily pad, going, 'Book, book.' And the frog takes one look at it, shakes his head and says, 'Reddit, reddit.'"

I beamed up at the other two. They failed to burst into laughter. They didn't even chuckle. They just glared at me. I swear the end of the world does something awful to people's sense of humour.

I took a quick look around, then got to my feet. The sunlight had moved up the wall since we had come in. "We'd better go now, guys."

Sam looked at me in disgust. "They aren't here yet. We'll wait until they turn up."

I shook my head. "They aren't coming. Trust me."

"Why should I?"

"Because I've been sent out more times than you two put together." It was true. I reckoned our leader had something against me. "The Library gang rely on the food too much to miss it. If they're hiding then that means that a Catcher's in the area."

That got their attention. It didn't matter how tough any kid pretended to be, none of us wanted to be caught. "Are you sure?" Sam asked.

"Try this," I said, and put a hand flat on the stairs. The other two glanced at each other and copied me.

After a moment I could feel a faint tremor shake the building. By the looks on their faces they'd felt it too.

"We have to get out of here," Sam hissed. "Come on, Mike. Jesse, grab the food."

The two older boys pushed past me. I looked at the white plastic bag sitting on the stairs, then followed them.

The Aberdeen outside wasn't in ruins, like you'd expect a city to be after the world had ended. The granite buildings had managed to endure for centuries. Eight months without being looked after hadn't had much effect. The grass in the small island across the street had grown long and leaves were everywhere, but that was the only notable difference. That and the silence. This used to be a busy part of the city but now there was no one. It was like the set of a TV show, waiting for the actors.

If I was lucky I'd be able to get away before the drama started.

Sam and Mike had already run to the left and I walked after them, going slower, taking my time. The ground shook again, more noticeably. It was getting closer.

By the side of the theatre there was a stone staircase that curled between the buildings on either side and led down to a street. I walked briskly towards it, not pausing to look around. If I hesitated for even a second I might be seen and captured. And on the stairs I would be safe. It couldn't follow me down there.

I kept thinking about my brother as I walked. It was something I'd found myself doing every time I was in danger. Sometimes I could almost feel him there with me, keeping me safe like he always had. I could imagine him here where I was, doing much better than me. Always prepared.

But he hadn't been prepared for this. Then again, who could prepare for the uprising? Who could have expected it?

I made it to the stairs and my heart rate decreased slightly. I took a deep breath and began walking down. The stairs were old worn stone and still slippery from the rain of the night before. I walked carefully, not wanting to risk a fall. The thing following me wouldn't be able to get me, but there were others who could.

I don't know what things were like elsewhere but in Aberdeen we quickly fell. Mankind didn't have much of a chance. After all, we were outnumbered six to one.

The ground shook again just as I reached the bottom of the stairs. I looked back, shrinking close to the ground and then freezing, trying not to be seen. There was a shadow, then the bulk of the thing itself strutted across the passageway behind me, blocking out the light. Just a large indistinct shape.

Mike and Sam were waiting for me at the bottom. I felt touched for a moment, before realising that they couldn't have gone any further without risking being seen. I sighed.

"This way, guys."

I led them round the back of His Majesty's theatre, climbing a fence and crawling through some overgrown bushes as I did. Then I motioned them to stop and slowly leaned around the corner of the building.

And there it was, crossing the bridge, heading towards the Art Gallery and the centre of town as if having a leisurely weekend stroll. One of the things that had been hunting us for two thirds of a year.

A giant mechanical chicken.

I just stared at it for a moment, then shook my head. Nope. My brother had never seen this coming at all.

# CHAPTER 2

Living in a chicken apocalypse is not quite what you'd expect. It wasn't as if everyone just woke up one day with a chicken standing on their chest, staring into their eyes. Even looking back there were no obvious signs that it was coming, like mysterious disappearances or random large eggs discovered. It had begun as a normal day. I'd gone into town with my brother to catch a movie, but he'd left me at the cinema in Union Square while he went to find some of his friends. He couldn't just call them because his mobile had stopped working.

I guess that was the first sign.

The second was probably the giant robotic chicken that crashed through the roof.

I can't really remember the rest of what happened that day. I started running, people screaming all around me, desperate to find some place to hide. I managed to survive by falling in with some guys hiding out in the train station. I didn't know who they were, and they didn't know who I was. We were all too scared to care.



A few months on and I think they had stopped being scared and just regretted letting me hang around.

I thought about this while crouched behind the library. After we were sure that the chicken was gone we hurried back to the train station. By this point Sam had noticed that I'd left the food bag behind.

"You idiot," he growled at me, still not confident enough to raise his voice. "I gave you one job and you left it behind. What are we going to tell the boss?"

"He'll understand. Those people need that food and this way they'll owe us one."

He gave me a little shove and I stumbled. "Yeah, because we don't need food at all. What was I thinking?"

I moved out of the way of another shove and glared at him. "We've got enough to last us for a while. They don't. And at least this way someone gets use of it. If we'd been captured then no one would have had the food."

By this point we had entered the train station. I stepped further away from Sam and looked around. Even after months of living here, I was still impressed by the sight.

Aberdeen train station had been built back when Britain still had an empire and liked to show off by making things big and shiny. The glass roof was high above us and still mostly intact, letting in the weak spring sunlight. The marble floor shone, though there was litter scattered everywhere. The air was colder in here and I huddled deeper into my jacket. Security

points were positioned between the benches and the tracks, but as we were already on the rails they didn't serve much point. We were used to clambering through them by now.

Sam and Mike ignored me as we made our way to one of the trains that was still waiting for passengers who would never come. We'd been lucky; a sleeper service to London had been idling on the tracks when the first attack came. It was warmer than most of the other trains and we all got beds. Compared to how some others lived it was almost civilised.

To get there we had to get up off the tracks. As I scrambled up the makeshift steps that we'd made out of suitcases, I saw a silhouette in the door of one of the carriages and Boss Noah stepped forward.

Like the apocalypse surrounding us, the leader of our little group wasn't what you'd expect. He was skinny, with glasses and a serious expression. Like the rest of us his hair was beginning to get a bit long and stood out from his head like a ginger halo. His T-shirt was a plain brown and unlike some he hadn't taken the excuse to dress in the latest fashions scavenged from shops. He was also one of the oldest here, at fourteen, but that wasn't what made him the leader. If it had been zombies instead of chickens then I don't think he would have survived very long, but against the chickens he was level-headed and never took any chances. He seemed to be fitted for the not-so-glamorous roles of organisation and motivation. He couldn't have fought his way out of

a wet paper bag but that wasn't what was needed here. His intelligence could be the saving of us all.

I don't think that he liked me either but at least he was good enough not to show it. Except by sending me out on all those expeditions.

He stepped lightly on to the platform as we came towards him.

"Sam, Mike," he said. Then his gaze swerved to me. "Jesse. Where's the food?"

Sam immediately puffed out his chest and stepped forward. "There was a Catcher patrolling," he said. "We had to get out. I told Jesse to grab the food, but he left it behind at the library."

Noah sighed and gestured. "Come inside and tell me about it."

So we did, sitting on bunks in Noah's bedroom. Because he was the boss he got a room to himself. As this was perhaps the only perk of the job we were OK with him having it. Sam told the story by himself, with Mike nodding occasionally beside him. When they finished, Noah fixed me with his piercing look. "Is all this true?"

"Yup," I replied, grinning at him. "I'd call the mission a success."

"A success?" Sam spluttered. "But we didn't get any of the clothes we were going to trade the food for."

I shot him a look. "We've got more clothes than we're ever going to need. We've got all of Union Square and there were plenty of clothes shops in there. It was

never about the clothes. It was about gaining another group's trust. And by leaving the food we've done that."

Noah nodded, though he didn't look happy about agreeing with me. "Jesse is right. We need to keep reaching out to other groups if we're going to survive. The Library Gang might not have anything to offer us right now but we could probably use them in the future."

Sam was even less pleased. "He disobeyed a direct order and left behind vital supplies and you're just going to let him get away with it?"

"Just leave it, Sam. What's done is done. Now go get something to eat."

Sam pushed past me and stormed off, Mike trailing behind him. I waited a bit then followed, but Noah called me back.

"Jesse, stay close, would you? I've got a job for you later."

I felt a flutter of apprehension but just nodded. "I'll be in the dining car," I told him.

To get to the dining car I had to pass by the Radio Room. Somehow the chickens had managed to take down a lot of the electronic communications and most of our mobile phones had run out of charge in the months since the first attack. But we had managed to salvage some stuff.

I looked into the room in passing and nodded to the kid on duty. He ignored me and continued messing around with the radio, turning the dials and getting

nothing but static. We had a couple of smart phones and a laptop as well but we only used one thing a day. The ones we weren't using were hooked up to a solar charger outside. It was the only way we could get any information on what was happening – and even then there was a lot we didn't know. We didn't even have any idea what the chickens were. I mean, they could have been anything from aliens to mutants that were somehow advanced enough to build these machines.

We didn't get much news but we got a bit, mostly from America. The UK government had fallen pretty quickly and the chickens had spread into Europe, where they were slowly pushing forward. A lot of world leaders had made various speeches, but the attack had caught everyone by surprise and they were pretty slow to do much else except for talk. There was fighting going on but nobody was anywhere near overcoming the chickens. Canada and Australia were supposed to be getting ready to launch a counter attack but that hadn't happened yet.

There was nothing new to hear so I left the room and continued towards the dining car. The walls were papered with pictures, warning people about what the chickens could do. Surprisingly, I was one of the few people who had actually seen a robot chicken. A lot of people who'd seen a Catcher had been taken. Noah had told us to draw posters so that everyone knew what we were dealing with. Some of them were pretty good. There was a stylish shot of a chicken with lasers

coming out of its eyes, one showing the explosive eggs they laid. There was even a diagram of the inside of a giant robot chicken. It had a kid being pecked up and swallowed, sliding down the chicken's throat and being trapped in its stomach. A lot of people had got freaked out by that one. As I slid the door to the dining car open I was just curious how the artist had known what it was like.

Maybe with a zombie apocalypse we would have seen some action... a lot of blood, maybe. But with the chickens we were in danger, but not able to actually go anywhere. Our free time was usually spent in the dining car of the train, talking, playing cards or reading. I found myself a seat and started doodling in a notebook I'd found in Union Square. With half an ear I listened to those around me.

The conversation was always the same, different people going through the same motions. It would be about TV shows or YouTube videos from when there *was* TV and YouTube. Games that they'd played on the Xbox or PlayStation. Causal stuff, like you'd hear in any playground.

And sometimes, when someone had had a bad day or the monotony was getting hard to handle, they'd talk about their families. Where they were, if they were still free. Everyone had given up hope that any parents were still free – the Catchers took the adults first – but there were older and younger brothers and sisters that no one knew about.

I could hear a couple of girls talking about it.

“I mean, my sister was smart,” one of them was saying. “She was in the Guides and everything. I’m sure she’s OK.”

I wasn’t sure. Guides were tough, but being tough hadn’t helped the army.

“And we don’t know the chickens attacked everywhere in Scotland. They could just have hit the cities. Maybe if we got far enough away we’d be safe. We should try it some time. Get as much food as we can and just follow the train lines south.”

No one who went outside the city ever came back. I mean, it might be that they got to safety. Or they could have just been captured. I know which one I thought was more likely.

The other girl was smarter than her friend.

“Look,” she said, putting an arm round her friend’s shoulders. “If there was help out there then they’d come and get us. No adult in Aberdeen managed to hide for more than a few days. We’re safe here. It wouldn’t be smart to leave.”

I was just nodding to myself when the first girl burst into tears.

“I miss my sister so much. Where is she? Where could she have gone?”

And that was the worst thing. No matter what we told ourselves, whether we thought our family and friends were captured or whether we hoped they had escaped somewhere, we just didn’t know. We had lots

of thoughts, lots of guesses – but in the end they were worth nothing.

The girl's sobbing was beginning to get to me, reminding me of my brother and how much I missed him. I closed my notebook and got up, ready to leave. If Noah wanted me, he could find me in my room.

I'd just reached the door when it slid open and the Boss himself was standing there. He smiled at me then noticed the girl wailing. A frown creased his brow and he gently pulled me through the door.

"Do you know what's up with her?" he asked, sliding the door shut on the noise.

"She misses her family."

He ran a hand through his hair. "We all miss our families. Think she'll be OK?"

I shrugged. "For a while."

He nodded. There wasn't really much else that could be said.

"What do you think of that group up at the library?"

I frowned at him. Was I about to be told off?

"I don't know. Like we said, I never saw them. They must be reasonably organised, to have survived this long. They knew there was a Catcher in the area before us as well; they'd cleared out. Though I guess they could just have a good view. Do you agree with Sam? You think I shouldn't have left the supplies?"

He shook his head. "Look Jesse, whatever Sam said, you made the right call. You do know that, right?"

I sighed but nodded. "Yeah, I know."



Then he fixed me with that special look of his that let me know trouble was coming. “I’m glad you got back. I’ve got a special job for you.”

I grinned at him, though my heart had started fluttering a bit. I ran through everything that it could be in my head, but nothing I could think of was that bad. “Oh?”

He nodded. “The Ambassador’s back.”

“Huh,” was all I could think to say, as the bottom dropped out of my stomach.

This was going to be terrible.